

The Matrix – Trading-In Spot for Carbon Credits?

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Must one sacrifice his/her dog to sustainability? The question is apparently raised by a new book titled “Time to Eat the Dog: The Real Guide to Sustainable Living” which claims that the “carbon paw print of a pet dog is more than double that of a gas-guzzling sports utility vehicle.” The book, written by Robert and Brenda Vale, sustainable living experts at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, attempts to draw attention to and teach about sustainable living in a particularly preachy and negative tone. The book puts everything from holidays to pets under attack in its attempt to wean out the unsustainable aspects of life, which, unfortunately, seem to all be the pleasurable aspects as well.

According to the book, a medium-sized dog’s annual diet is estimated to contain about 360 pounds of meat and 200 pounds of grains and requires roughly double the resources it would take to drive a sports utility vehicle (SUV) 6200 miles a year. To further incriminate your pooch, the book also claims that it takes 0.84 hectares of land to keep a medium-sized dog fed and compares this to running a 4.6 liter Toyota Land Cruiser, which, when including the energy required to construct it and to drive it 10,000 kilometers a year, requires 0.41 hectares.

So should we throw Spot under the SUV? Dr. Marion Nestle, an NYU professor of nutrition and author of multiple books on related topics, says no. Nestle first counters the book’s annual diet claims by looking to the New Scientist’s review of the book which, elaborating on the book’s data, notes that an average dog needs about 300 grams of dry food a day. Nestle explains how fresh meat supplies about 2 calories per gram and cereals provide nearly 4 calories per gram, so the book is overestimating the amount of food needed by dogs by a factor of two.

To further counter the Vale’s claims, Nestle considers more qualitative data. She points out that most dogs do not eat the same meat that humans do, but rather, consume meat by-products, stuff that humans won’t eat anyway. She concludes that because of this, pets actually perform a public service by eliminating the need to dispose of such by-products in landfills, by burning, as fertilizer, or converting it to fuel, all of which have serious environmental consequences.

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So do our pets play a part in sustainable living? Yes, but there's no need to eat Spot. If one concludes that all things that make life pleasant are unsustainable, we should all just give up now. Rather, although it is important to consider sustainability, one needs to fully understand the impact of certain practices, such as having pets, before demonizing such lifestyles. Although "Time to Eat the Dog" nobly draws attention to the important concept of sustainability, by neglecting to incorporate all the facts, or matrix components, the credibility and the applicability of the book are undermined.

References

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